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Following Sean (USA, 2006, 87')¹

“Home Brew”

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In 1966 I'd just graduated from a New York journalism program at Columbia University, and was at loose ends. I couldn't see myself as either a print or broadcast reporter. So I packed up my car and set out for California with the vague notion that I could morph my newspaper training into a documentary film career. This reflects the sort of magical thinking, mobility and aimless adventure that young Americans could launch themselves into in the mid-60s.

After a couple of years in Berkeley I wound up across the Bay in the Haight Ashbury district of San Francisco, simply because I'd had the incredible good luck to find a large ground-floor apartment with a sunny back yard and a rent of \$55 a month. The one proviso to the lease was that I had to occasionally sweep up the garbage in the building's alleyway.

I enrolled in yet another graduate program at San Francisco State University (where I had no specific degree strategy) in film production. The proviso for this was that I had to come up with an actual film project. Happily, my academic pursuits and living situation dovetailed. Up on the third floor of my building was a hippie crash pad led by a family that had the most precocious, outrageous, charming four year old boy I'd ever encountered. His name was Sean and, in addition to the daily topics of his real and imagined world, he talked casually about pot smoking, being busted by the cops, riots and other subjects that were wafting through the Haight-Ashbury air at the time. He would occasionally come down and visit me on the first floor and so eventually an idea germinated.

This little boy looked like an ideal film subject – except that even though he had the wit and perceptiveness of a 15-year-old he still had the attention span of a four-year-old. Fortunately I decided not to pre-interview him but just sat him down on a couch and asked him some questions on camera. He put up with that for about a half hour but then slipped off the couch and started wandering around the apartment; then wanted to go outside. I was doing a lot of skateboarding at the time so I took the School's small hand camera and followed him on my board while he ran through the streets of the Haight. These shots provided the B-roll material to go over the interview.

The resulting 14-minute black and white film played in festivals and theatrically across the country, and the world, and caused considerable alarm, celebration and speculation about who this kid was and what the content of his conversation suggested about mid-century American society.

¹ Available on dvd in USA. More info about *Following Sean* at www.followingsean.com

Thirty years later I decided to go back to San Francisco and make a full-length movie about what had happened to Sean and his family. For various reasons (most of them having to do with fund raising) the project stretched out over ten years. The longer it went the more mirror-like the undertaking became. Taking so long to finish the film weighed on my psyche but it also looped out a luxurious ribbon of time in which many new things happened to the adult Sean and the people around him. It also gave me the freedom to hunt down parallel footage from Sean's family, from other independent filmmakers who had been shooting material in the 60s, and snippets from my own personal archive. These elements turned out to constitute a significant portion of the finished feature film and gave it a personal and artisanal flavor. The slowly expanding feature film grew from a straight-forward update of Sean's adult life to a reflection on the impact of the 60s on a whole generation and a recapitulation of my own migration from New York to California. There were scenes of my early home life, of a few 60s posturings, ruminations about the meaning of work, marriage and ageing, and lots of digressions.

A number of reviewers and viewers responded strongly and warmly to the film's informal style. Since I'd been absolutely determined not to make a nostalgic, TV network look back at the storied, halcyon sixties era, aimed at a baby-boomer audience, I was very gratified that a large number of younger people (in their 20s and 30s) seem moved by the film and its intimate tone. But my personal approach wasn't everyone's cup of tea. For some critics, any variety of self-reflexive cinema, and first-person narration, is an anathema. And for these folks, the addition of home movie footage only compounds the problem.

Dropping the critical appellation "home movie" on to any cinematic endeavor is both a benediction and a dismissal. It can lend the enterprise a vague authenticity but it also places it squarely in an "amateur" category. But I don't mind. Call me an amateur and I'll kick the root of the word (to love) right back at you. I do really love weaving bits of home movies (mine and others') into larger works because I think they often have a fragmentary – and sometimes even dream-like – quality that can cut against the lugubriousness of standard documentary exposition.

For most of my career I've worked in film, not video, so the home movies I shot were 16mm "short ends: (little left-over pieces of the 400-foot reels of raw stock that I'd used to film the serious non-amateur subjects of serious films). At home, like anyone else, I would tend to drag the camera out at marked moments: birthdays, holidays, rites of passage, or when something particularly adorable was happening. This would often ruin the spontaneity of the event itself -- especially since 16mm shooting usually required a separate sound set-up and, frequently, lights. So the "action" often had to wait until Papa's equipment was in place and ready to roll. I'd shoot a short scene, process it, look at it once, and then put it away. This was personal family archive material; like anyone's scrapbook or photo album. There was almost never the thought that the footage could one day wind up in a "real" movie.

For most people, this sort of family material (photos, video, letters etc.) gets shelved away and never referred to again. That is until the parents die and the children

have to sort through the boxes of stuff and decide what to do with it. But one advantage of 16mm is that it's so expensive you can't shoot too much of it. So I've tended to remember what I have lying around. And sometimes when editing my professional films I would remember a home movie scene, drop it into the cut and see how it worked. Usually it didn't. It looked like a thematic stretch. But then maybe later on I'd try it at a different point in the cut, or edit it in a different way, or find an alternative way to introduce it and then perhaps it would start to work. Sort of. Then finally when I'd arrived at a final structure for the film, some of those home movie pieces seemed to work quite well, some beautifully, and the others not at all. The ones that didn't got lifted out and put back on the personal archive shelf.

The biggest challenge in making "Following Sean" was filling the huge coverage gap I faced in depicting the central character's life. I'd known him as a four-year-old in the mid 60s and then not again until I resumed contact with him in the mid-90s. This was no the "Up Series" where Michael Apted's updated interviews were ready to roll every seven years. What was I going to do to fill in this kid's teenage and young-adult years?

The original 14-minute movie was mostly culled from a 20-minute interview I did with the 4-year-old Sean in 1968, and I used about half of that original film in "Following Sean." Since the original had been a bare-bones student production there were almost no out-takes to go back and pick over. Most of the additional footage I found in the major archival houses was uninspired. It depicted the peace/love/dance-in-the-streets 60s that we all had watched on television at the time and have been fed ever since. The most interesting material I uncovered turned out to be that shot by people who had been going through the counter-cultural experiences themselves. Some were filmmakers; some not, but they weren't television reporters. These scenes I supplemented with some 8 mm. family movies that Sean's father, Johnny, had shot. When mixed all together, the footage from the 60s filmmakers passes easily for Sean's family home movies and so it fills in a number of gaps. I suppose this is the essential "lie" of the film – a medium, we must all admit, does lie and cheat repeatedly, while it strives to arrive at a truth.

So what's the fundamental appeal of these unearthed home-produced nuggets? On television, in "America's Funniest..." the pleasure seems to come from watching people fall off porches or ride bicycles into hedges -- our 21st Century Keystone Cops. That's a basic pleasure. Beyond that I suppose home movie footage just has a smell of authenticity. Even when we experience it later in films made by professional filmmakers we read an innocence into the original recording. We feel that the holder of the camera back then didn't have an agenda – or at least had an agenda that was well sublimated – and most importantly – private. The larger question of what happens when something familial and private becomes professional and public is way too intricate, and well worked over, for me to consider here. I'm an amateur. Sort of.